



Covering San Joaquin County and the Mother Lode

Now your smartphone can help you find the ol' swimming hole

Geotourism on rise thanks to app, advice

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A high tech app using low tech advice can help people make their way to Sierra Nevada and foothill sites, such as White Pines Lake in Arnold
c Michael McCollum/The Record

your dreams.

SAN ANDREAS - Imagine yourself in some High Sierra, almost-ghost town on a one lane road, hopelessly lost. You didn't find the local swimming hole you'd been hearing about for years.

You're about to push through the swinging doors of a decrepit saloon to either drown your woe or get directions. But the sound of breaking glass and raucous laughter inside prompts you to pause.

So you reach for your smartphone and open your Sierra Nevada app. Within minutes, you have expert advice guiding you to the lake of

Geotourism

Sierra Nevada Geotourism Mapguide Project

- Online: sierranevadageotourism.org
- Free app (iPhone or Android): Sierra Nevada by Old Town Creative

Soon, you are floating on your back, saying a prayer of thanks for geotourism.

Geotourism blends high-tech GPS and Internet technology with low-tech advice from local residents. And in the past year, tens of thousands of people a month have been using it to explore the Sierra

Nevada through the Sierra Nevada Geotourism Mapguide Project, one of many enterprises around the world.

The Sierra Nevada site has listings for 1,400 locations, said Nicole DeJonghe, manager for the project and an employee of the Sierra Business Council.

The listings include such Mother Lode attractions as the Electra white-water run on the Mokelumne River, Calaveras Big Trees State Park and Double Bridges, a swimming hole in a cave near Vallecito, known mostly to locals.

"I like to explain (the app) as place based in the sense that it is things that are specific and distinctive to the Sierra," DeJonghe said.

In other words, the council that reviews proposed listings wouldn't approve one for a chain restaurant that a traveler could just as well visit in Beijing or Bakersfield. Instead, listings tend to be for unique, historic, prehistoric, cultural or natural features. That can include restaurants and one-of-a kind inns.

Although anyone can go to the website and suggest a listing, most of the first 1,400 were submitted by people involved with conservation, tourism or public land-use agencies. The Electra Run listing, for example, was written by Katherine Evatt, president of the Foothill Conservancy, a group advocating for preservation of the Mokelumne River.

Evatt said geotourism is an effort to help boost the local economy, while also protecting the natural wonders that draw tourists.

"The goal is to ensure people have access to places without those places getting trashed," Evatt said.

When land managers build access points on local rivers, for example, they make the parking lots small enough to prevent the river from getting trampled by overuse. That too, she said, is part of geotourism.

Jim Eicher, associate field manager for the Mother Lode field office of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management, said he has no data to indicate whether listings such as the one for the Electra Run are drawing more visitors.

But Eicher said that in the past decade, many outdoor enthusiasts have become sophisticated users of online data such as specialized websites showing river flows important to kayakers. It makes sense that something like the Sierra geotourism effort would serve those same recreationists, he said.

Meanwhile, DeJonghe said the Sierra Nevada website has had 1.5 million visitors since January 2011, and gets about 30,000 visitors a month.

The free Sierra Nevada app that recently launched for iPhone and Android should soon further boost that figure, she said.

The Sierra Business Council operates the project with support from the U.S. Forest Service, the Sierra Nevada Conservancy, the Foothill Conservancy, the Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce and a number of other public and private agencies.

The National Geographic Society also is a project partner and has been promoting global geotourism.

DeJonghe said the project seeks to avoid promoting locations that already are overused.

"We are not focused on shoving more people into one impacted area. A huge goal is recognizing that even within the Sierra Nevada there are attractions that are overrun with too many visitors. There are also many other places that crave and want more visitors. We are highlighting overlooked places and overlooked activities and events."

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